



THE AL AZHAR DOCUMENTS AND THE DEFENCE OF THE FAITH AND SOCIETY TODAY

Ayman Fuad Sayyid ●

Although al Azhar Mosque is recognized as being Fatimid Ismaili in origin and the main centre of Ismailism in the Islamic world for around two centuries (from 361 AH/972 CE to 567 AH/1171 CE), that role ended when Salah al Din Yusuf bin Ayub (567 AH/1171 CE) abolished the Fatimid Caliphate and Egypt returned to the fold of Sunni states that dedicated their Friday *khutbah* (sermon) to the Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad. However, the Friday *khutbah* continued to be suspended at al Azhar for over a century, because the Mosque was still seen as an Ismaili symbol.

Its role as a bastion of Sunni Islam only began when the Mamluk Sultan al Dhahir Baybars restored its permission to deliver the *khutbah* in 665 AH/1267 CE after he had consulted the '*ulama*' (religious scholars) on the matter; by this time it was some three years after the Fall of Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad in 665 AH/1258 CE at the hands of the Mongols and Baybars had become the Caliph's host in Egypt.

● Academic Professor from Egypt.



Al Azhar played an important educational role during the Mamluk period alongside the numerous *madrastas* (religious schools) that were set up in Cairo in that era. Later, it rose to even greater prominence with the fall of the Mamluk state in Egypt and the Levant and the extension of Ottoman rule over those regions and other territories that later came to be known as the Arab world, and by the end of the 11th century AH/17th century CE its head had become known as “*Sheikh al Islam*” (“Sheikh of Islam”) – a title that was subsequently changed to “*Sheikh al Azhar*” (“Sheikh of al Azhar”).

A major transformation in al Azhar’s fortunes took place with the start of the French campaign in Egypt in 1213 AH/1798 CE, the defeat of Murad Bey’s forces and the withdrawal of the other defending troops, who believed there was no point in continuing the fight. Cairo was then left to the mercy of the invaders and unrest and panic seized the city. At this point al Azhar assumed the leadership of Egypt’s popular and patriotic movement and, following negotiations with the French, it formed a nine-member *Diwan* (Governing Council) of senior dignitaries to oversee the government of Cairo and run its affairs. Sheikh ‘Abdullah al Sharqawi, the then Sheikh of al Azhar, was its head and Sheikh Muhammad al Mahdi was its secretary.

Although this *Diwan* had limited powers and was subject to the ultimate control of the occupation authority, the men who comprised its membership were a clear reflection of the importance of al Azhar and the status of its ‘*ulama*’ as well as their role as popular and patriotic leaders. A revolutionary committee set up in the Mosque to resist the injustices of French rule spearheaded the First Cairo Revolution, which the French were unable to suppress until after they had bombed the Mosque, stormed it with their cavalry and occupied it. That action resulted in a large number of deaths and many people were buried beneath the ruins.

Al Azhar supported Mohammed Ali Pasha’s rise to power and its ‘*ulama*’ submitted a number of petitions on his behalf. Their actions, which were co-ordinated with the great national leader Umar Makram - the chief of the Egyptian nobles - had the effect of rallying the people round Mohammed Ali and strengthening his position. The success of their efforts culminated in the head of al Azhar (Sheikh ‘Abdullah al Sharqawi) and

Umar Makram investing him with the *khil'ah* (robe of honour) of sovereignty in 1220 AH/1805 CE.

Over the years that followed al Azhar continued to enjoy considerable status, though its effectiveness was muted periodically during times of despotic political pressure, only to rise again thereafter at the first opportunity.

During and after the reign of the Khedive Ismail al Azhar came under the sway of the new reform movement, and the arrival in Egypt of the great reformer Jamal al Din al Afghani had a significant impact when he helped raise awareness and awaken new aspirations through his contacts with its '*ulama*' and students. Subsequently his ideas were to influence the Grand Mufti of Egypt and Imam Muhammad Abduh.

Several of al Azhar's former pupils had a major impact on public life in Egypt in the early 20th century. They included distinguished intellectuals, journalists and men of letters who influenced public opinion and helped promote a spirit of patriotism during the 1919 Revolution – a time when al Azhar was one of the main centres of action.

The 25th January Revolution of 2011 marked the start of a new era, but as things developed radical fundamentalist groups began to emerge and propagate their own narrow-minded and obscurantist ideas. In such a situation, it was up to al Azhar to resist this trend by presenting a moderate view of Islam, while showing that it spoke for the whole of the *Ummah* (Islamic Nation/Community) and did not subscribe to any particular ideological viewpoint or blueprint. Instead, it embodied Islam as based on the Qur'an, the Sunnah and the consensus of the '*ulama*' of the *Ummah* and, as such, it was the faithful representative of the different schools of Islamic thought and *fiqh* (jurisprudence).

Under the leadership of its present Sheikh and Grand Imam – Dr. Ahmad al Tayyib – al Azhar convened a number of meetings which were attended by a broad range of leading Egyptian intellectuals and scholars, including its own '*ulama*'. During these meetings they discussed the needs of Egypt's historic and critical circumstances in the wake of its 25th January



Revolution and reviewed the Revolution's significance in determining Egypt's future progress towards the noble goals of freedom, dignity, equality and social justice.

Following these meetings al Azhar issued four important documents:

1 – The al Azhar document on Egypt's future.

2 – The document on the Arab Spring and support for the Arab liberation movements.

3 – The Declaration by al Azhar and the intellectual community on basic freedoms.

4 – The al Azhar document on women's rights.

1 - The al Azhar document on Egypt's future

Presenting this document, the Sheikh and Grand Imam of al Azhar – Dr. Ahmad al Tayyib – described the circumstances leading up to its publication as follows:

“Because of the critical times which Egypt is currently going through, [in the interests of the country's] security and stability, and to protect the gains of its Revolution, all dissenters and holders of divisive opinions should unite under one roof in the interests of the diversity and integration we seek for our nation and Egypt at this crucial turning point in its history. I truly say to you that if the diversity of efforts to achieve a strategy for the future degenerates into intellectual feuding and recriminations, the only result will be bitter fruits for the nation and Egypt, both now and in the future. Essentially, constitutions are a true expression of a nation's identity, the conscience of a people and the interests of a society, and a diverse approach to efforts to produce the political and constitutional structure of the future will only be successful if it is conducted within a framework of national unity and higher goals.”

This was how the Sheikh of al Azhar characterised the critical situation in Egypt during the first months following the 25th January Revolution. He then explained al Azhar's position on the situation:

“Al Azhar has declared on more than one occasion that it distances itself equally from all sides and that it is closely monitoring all proposals on the nation’s future. [Today] it declares clearly and candidly that it will not involve itself in political or party-political activities, or in politics in the generally understood sense of the word. Such matters are not its concern. At the same time, however, it has assumed a national role that has deep historical roots, which has been entrusted to it by the Nation in order to safeguard its age-old civilization and culture along with its identity, which resists [any attempts to] destroy or dissolve it. On the basis of this national role and the weighty responsibility which al Azhar has taken upon itself – as well as the fact that it recognizes the trust placed in it before Allah and history – we call upon the people of this country to agree to accept the ‘al Azhar document’ as a solution that will enable the people to emerge from the constriction and perils of dissension into the wide spaces of [consensus] and serious co-operation, for the sake of our entire country and in recognition of the supplications of our martyrs and the sacrifices of our masses.”

At this point the Sheikh reviewed al Azhar’s historic role in providing leadership for the people and the Nation. He recalled the responsibilities placed upon its shoulders and its consciousness of the weight of that trust before Allah and history. Then he noted that the document is no more than:

“A mere value framework [designed to] safeguard the basic immutable [qualities] of our people. It considers a constitutional, democratic, modern nation-state to be an established national requirement along with everything that implies, including full citizenship and a genuine rotation of authority in a way that ensures that power will not be monopolised in the hands of a particular group or usurped by another [rival] group.”

The Imam concluded his address with the observation that:

“Because it adopts a consensual approach, the document is well qualified to act as a guide when drawing up the constitution, and as an honourable charter to which all can commit themselves voluntarily and of their own free will. It is not being imposed upon anyone but leaves the matter to the will of the people which the awaited constitution will express.”



The preamble to the document notes that al Azhar's leading role in promoting sound, moderate Islamic thought is universally recognized. Those taking part in the meeting stressed its (i.e. the document's) importance as "a beacon of enlightenment" defining the relationship between religion and the state and establishing the principles required for political legitimacy.

The preparatory discussions also drew much of their inspiration from al Azhar's heritage as a centre of Islamic scholarship, progress and reform from the time of Sheikh Hasan al Attar and his pupil Rifa'ah al Tahtawi to Imam Muhammad Abduh and his pupils, and including the institution's other imams and jurists up to the present day, including – among others - Sheikh Muhammad Mustafa al Maraghi, Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah Draz, Sheikh Mustafa Abdel Razzaq and Sheikh Mahmoud Shaltut.

Further inspiration was drawn from the contributions of leading Egyptian intellectuals – philosophers, legists and men of letters and the arts - to the advancement of human knowledge and the shaping of the modern Egyptian and Arab mindset.

It was on this basis that the gathering approved the following enlightened Islamic principles and general guidelines based upon the established rulings of the Shariah, which reflect a proper understanding of the religion of Islam:

One: To reinforce the foundations of a modern, democratic, constitutional nation-state based upon a constitution that meets with the approval of the *Ummah*, separates the state's ruling authorities from its legal institutions, defines its framework of governance, guarantees the rights and obligations of all its individual members on an equal basis, places its legislative authority in the hands of the representatives of the people and ensures that it is compatible with a correct understanding of Islam. In this way, Islam – together with its legal system, civilization and history - will be recognized as being completely different from the clerical/religious types of states and cultures that have afflicted mankind in the past during certain periods of its history. The people must be free to run their own societies and choose the mechanisms and institutions that will

serve their interests, the only condition being that their legislation should be based on the general principles of the Islamic Shariah. At the same time, followers of other Divine religions must be guaranteed the right to follow their own religious laws on personal status matters.

Two: To approve a democratic system based upon free direct elections; this is the modern system for enforcing the principles of Islamic *shura* (consultation), guaranteeing pluralism and the peaceful transfer of power, defining prerogatives, monitoring performance, holding officials to account before the representatives of the people, upholding the public interest in all legislative measures and decisions, administering the affairs of state in accordance with the Law (and only the Law), prosecuting cases of corruption, and ensuring complete transparency and freedom of access to information.

Three: Freedom of thought and opinion, while ensuring full respect for human rights and the rights of women and children, a commitment to the principle of pluralism, respect for the Divine religions and a recognition of citizenship status as the cornerstone of responsibility in the community.

Four: Full respect for the right to hold different views as well as respect for the ethics of debate, while rejecting the practice of accusing others of Unbelief or treason, or the exploitation of religion in order to spread enmity between citizens. The promotion or sectarian or racial discord is to be considered a crime against the nation. There must be dialogue on equal terms and mutual respect in dealings between the different sections of society, while ensuring that there is no discrimination between the rights and obligations of any of the country's citizens.

Five: A commitment to comply with international conventions and resolutions and uphold those civilized principles governing human relations that are compatible with the customs and traditions of Islamic, Arab and Egyptian culture, as exemplified by its examples of peaceful coexistence and its endeavours to work for the benefit of humanity.

Six: An absolute commitment to upholding the dignity of the Egyptian Nation, defending its national standing, protecting and respecting the



houses of worship of the followers of the three Divinely-revealed Faiths, ensuring that all are free to perform their religious rites unimpeded, and respecting all outward and visible expressions of worship whatever they may be without abusing the people's culture or traditions. Furthermore, there must be an absolute commitment to upholding freedom of expression and artistic and literary creativity with the framework of our established cultural values.

Seven: Education, scientific and academic research and a readiness to embrace the Knowledge Age are to be recognized as the signposts along Egypt's road to cultural progress. Every effort must be made to catch up in those areas in which we have fallen behind in this respect, including enlisting the efforts of the whole community to eradicate illiteracy, invest in human resources and ensure the successful achievement of future projects.

Eight: To recognize the priorities needed for promoting development and social justice, resisting tyranny, fighting corruption and eliminating unemployment, while releasing society's potential and creative energies for the benefit of the country's economy and social, cultural and media programmes. Our people need to recognize this as the main goal of their country's present stage of development. Proper health care is to be considered as an obligation on the part of the state towards every citizen.

Nine: Egypt needs to develop its relations with its fellow Arab states and its neighbours in the Islamic world and Africa as well as the rest of the globe. It must support Palestinian rights, defend the independence of the Egyptian Will, restore its historic leadership role on a basis of cooperation for the common good, promote the public interest within a framework of full independence, contribute to mankind's efforts to further the progress of humanity, protect the environment and help achieve a just peace between nations.

Ten: Support for the independence of al Azhar as an institution, the restoration of the Council of Senior Scholars and its power to nominate and select the Sheikh of al Azhar, and improvements to al Azhar's educational curriculum so that it can regain its traditional leadership role and global influence.

Eleven: Al Azhar should be seen as the final authority on matters related to Islam, including Islamic learning, the Islamic heritage and modern-day *fiqh* and intellectual *ijtihad* (interpretative judgement) initiatives, though without denying others the right to express opinions when they are qualified to do so. In such circumstances all must observe the ethics of debate and respect the conclusions of the *Ummah's 'ulama'*.

The *'ulama'* of al Azhar and the intellectuals taking part in the preparation of this document appeal to all Egyptian political parties and trends to commit themselves to work for Egypt's political, economic and social progress within the framework of the fundamental principles laid down in this Declaration.

2 - The document on the Arab Spring and support for the liberation movements in the Arab world

This document is concerned with the Arab Spring revolutions. It condemns the tyrants of the Arab world and considers revolt against them to be a national duty. Al Azhar regards its six articles as a summary of its own views – and the views of Egyptian and Arab intellectuals – on the Arab popular revolutions.

The document notes that peoples and revolutionaries calling for freedom and social justice cannot be classed as transgressors. On the contrary, they are doing no more than their duty, particularly when their rulers fail to respond to their demands for justice and equality.

The document maintains that any Arab ruler who resorts to violence and slaughter against his own people in response to their calls for freedom has lost his legitimacy. It also calls upon Arab rulers to take prompt steps to bring about reforms and satisfy the national demands of their populations so that the Islamic and Arab peoples can join the ranks of the civilized nations.

It endorses the peoples' desire for *shura*, justice, freedom and human rights and calls upon the rulers and heads of state to respond to their demands. After the sessions during which the document was debated, the



Sheikh of al Azhar said: “Confronting any peaceful national protest with armed force, violence and the shedding of the blood of peaceful citizens is a violation of the contract between the *Ummah* and its rulers; it invalidates the ruling authority’s legitimacy, so that consequently it no longer has the right to continue to exercise its role [based on the principle] of rule by mutual consent. If governments persist in their oppressive behaviour and callously shed the blood of innocent citizens in order to remain in power illegitimately (in spite of the people’s will), they will be guilty of the crimes of ‘soiling their pages’ and the oppressed people will have the right to dismiss [their] overweening rulers and hold them to account”.

The Sheikh also noted that the shedding of innocent blood marks the dividing line between legitimate and illegitimate rule, and – in this connection - he called upon all the regular Arab armies to fulfil their constitutional duties as protectors of the Nation, rather than acting as instruments of repression.

The document notes that al Azhar’s ‘*ulama*’ and other leading intellectuals support the Arab peoples’ campaigns for change and reforms - similar to those that have already taken place in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya and are still being fought for in Syria and Yemen. It also notes their appeal to Arab and Islamic society to strive for the success of those revolutions with minimum loss of life and property.

It rejects Shi’a expansionism in the Islamic world, including its efforts to propagate Shi’ism in Sunni states, particularly Egypt, through books and satellite TV channels. It repudiates the Shi’a practice of insulting the Companions of the Messenger (PBUH) and the symbols of Sunni Islam, all of which serve the interests of the Zionist entity and harm the Islamic *Ummah*. Until now al Azhar has followed a policy of restraint for the sake of Muslim unity, but it recognizes that it has other options for defending Sunni Islam and it regards abuse of the Companions as a red line that cannot be ignored. It will therefore take a firm stand against Shi’a expansionism, which is an alien phenomenon.

The Sheikh of al Azhar stressed that the revolutions reflect the will of the Arab peoples and have their roots in domestic Arab factors, despite

Western financial and other pressures – particularly from the USA – to bring about democratic change in the region. The West should realise that its efforts have had no effect whatsoever and that the movements are inspired by local conditions and the local cultural heritage, which must be respected. The al Azhar document is an example of this.

The text of the document is as follows:

One: From a religious and constitutional point of view the ruling authority’s legitimacy is contingent upon the people’s consent and free choice through open, fair, transparent, democratic elections - the normal, contemporary alternative to the traditional Islamic *bay’ah* (pledge of allegiance) system and one which is consistent with government systems and procedures in modern states. According to established constitutional practice there is a separation of powers between the legislative, executive and judicial authorities and the monitoring, auditing and investigatory bodies, and the Nation is the source of all authority and the granter of legitimacy (or the body that withdraws that legitimacy if or when necessary).

Many rulers justify their exercise of absolute power on the basis of an incomplete interpretation of the Qur’anic *ayat* (verse): “O Believers! Obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those from among you are invested with authority” (*Al Nisa’*, 59), while ignoring its context as expressed in the previous *ayat*, which states frankly: “Allah commands you to deliver trusts to those worthy of them; and when you judge between people, to judge with justice” (*Al Nisa’*, 58) – a clear indication that when a ruler betrays his trust and fails to establish justice, the people have the right to demand justice and resist injustice and tyranny. Those of our *fuqaha’* (scholars of jurisprudence) who say that it is obligatory to remain patient and acquiesce in the tyranny of a despotic ruler for the sake of the *Ummah*’s stability also assert that it is permissible for an unjust, tyrannical ruler to be removed from office (when possible) in order to preclude any potential harm to the *Ummah* and its society.

Two: When a popular national opposition raises its voice in peaceful protest (a form of action which is a people’s established right in order to set



their rulers on the right path), and their rulers fail to respond or introduce the necessary reforms (and indeed persist in ignoring their peoples' just demands for freedom and justice), then their opponents can in no way be regarded as transgressors. In fact, the transgressors will be the ones who – according to the *fiqh* definition – have the power, are isolated from the *Ummah*, raise their weapons against their opponents and spread mischief upon earth by force. On the other hand, peaceful national opposition movements represent the very essence of human rights in Islam and are supported by all international charters and conventions. Indeed, it is the citizens' duty to work for the betterment of their society and set their rulers on the right path, while it is the duty of the rulers and those in authority to respond to them in a straightforward and positive manner.

Three: Responding to peaceful national protest with violence and armed force, and shedding the blood of non-violent citizens, is a violation of the contract between the *Ummah* and its rulers. It deligitimises the ruling authority so that it no longer has the right to continue in power on the grounds that it is “ruling by mutual consent”. If it continues to act in a tyrannical manner and shed the blood of its innocent citizens in order to remain in power – illegitimately and against the will of its people – it will be guilty of the crime of “defiling its pages”, so that consequently the oppressed people will have the right to take steps to remove their rulers and hold them to account; more than that, they will also have the right to replace the regime, regardless of any claims the regime may make that it is maintaining stability or protecting the country from sedition or hostile conspiracies. The shedding of innocent blood marks the dividing line between a regime's legitimacy and illegitimacy, and in such circumstances it is the duty of the regular armed forces to carry out their constitutional obligation to defend the Nation, rather than acting as instruments for repressing, terrorising and slaughtering the population. The Qur'an states: “...whoever kills a soul unless for a soul or for corruption [done] in the land - it is as if he had slain mankind entirely. And whoever saves one - it is as if he had saved mankind entirely.” (*Al Ma'idah*, 32)

Four: The revolutionary and reformist forces must at all costs avoid any actions that might lead to bloodshed; nor must they rely upon outside

support, whatever its source and whatever justification it might use in order to justify its intervention in their countries' affairs. Otherwise, they will themselves be illegitimate and guilty of oppression and the ruling authority will need to ensure that they return to the path of national unity, which is the supreme duty and takes precedence over all other obligations. The revolutionary forces must unite to make their dream of justice and freedom a reality, while eschewing sectarianism, racism and religious discrimination. Only then will they be able to guarantee the integrity of the national fabric and respect for the rights of citizenship, while at the same time mobilising the people's potential for the sake of a democratic transformation which serves the interests of the whole community and leads to a future based upon equality and equity. Rather than degenerating into sectarian or religious strife, the revolution must safeguard the country's institutions, maintain national harmony and protect the Nation from external threats and any attempts to plunder its resources.

Five: Armed with these Islamic and constitutional principles, which embody the essence of civilized awareness, the '*ulama*' of al Azhar and Egypt's leading intellectual and cultural figures have declared their full support for the Will of the Arab people and for the renewal, reform, freedom and social justice that have triumphed in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya and are still being fought for in Syria and Yemen, and they condemn the brutal instruments of repression that are seeking to extinguish them. They call upon Arab and Islamic society to take decisive and effective initiatives to ensure their success with the minimum of losses, while affirming that the peoples have the absolute right to choose their rulers, as well as an obligation to ensure that those [rulers] follow the right path and avoid falling into the pitfalls of corruption and exploitation. The legitimacy of any government is contingent upon the will of the people, while the existence of a peaceful, unarmed national opposition is a right enshrined in Islamic legislation as well as a basic human right guaranteed in all international charters and conventions.

Six: The '*ulama*' of al Azhar and their colleagues in the intellectual community appeal to the ruling Arab and Islamic regimes to embrace political, social and constitutional reform voluntarily and begin the process



of democratic transition. The awakening of the oppressed peoples is an inescapable reality and today it is not within the power of any ruler to deny his people the sunlight of freedom. Indeed, it is shameful that – unlike the rest of the world - the Arab region and some Islamic states are languishing in a morass of backwardness, subjugation and tyranny, which are being wrongly attributed to Islam and its culture, which [it goes without saying] is innocent of such slanders. Those states need to take prompt steps to join the march of scientific and technological progress and knowledge production, and invest their human and natural resources for the benefit of their citizens and the well-being of humanity as a whole.

Despots and tyrants are mistaken if they think they can escape the fate of the oppressors or [continue to] mislead their peoples. This is the age of open communications, the knowledge explosion and enlightened religious and cultural principles, and the Arab world offers numerous obvious examples of sacrifice and struggle. All these factors ensure that the people's awakening is a blazing torch and the cause of freedom is a banner raised high, and that the hopes of the oppressed peoples are leading them to fight to the death until victory. May those who are ignorant of the Faith, who pervert the teachings of Islam and who champion tyranny, injustice and despotism desist from [their] folly, which will ultimately be of no avail: “...and Allah has full power to implement His design, but most of the people do not know that” (Qur'an, *Yusuf*, 21).

O Allah, we ask You for Mercy with which You will guide our hearts, unite us and remove our trials and tribulations from us, O Lord of the Worlds.

The above Declaration followed a series of constructive discussions on the Arab revolutions' positive results and it met with a warm response from a range of groups and strains of opinion, who agreed upon a set of principles based upon Islamic thought, inspired by the aspirations of the Arab peoples and – ultimately – sponsored by al Azhar.

It also reflected an awareness on the part of al Azhar's senior '*ulama*' – and the intellectuals who took part in the discussions with them – of the demands of this crucial phase in the history of the Arab *Ummah*

and its peoples' legitimate struggle for freedom, justice and democracy. It demonstrated their determination to rejoin the march of civilization, inspired by Islam's spirit of liberation and reinforced by the *fiqh* rulings on the legitimacy of governance and their role in promoting reform and serving the *Ummah's* higher objectives and interests. Their position, which was co-ordinated with al Azhar and backed by the views of leading Egyptian and Arab intellectuals in support of the movements for liberation from imperialism and tyranny, expressed the consensus that the *Ummah* needs to rouse itself from its slumber, embrace the cause of progress, overcome its historical obstacles and establish its citizens' right to social justice based upon the principles of the Shariah. Only by doing so will it be able to:-

- 1) Safeguard the Shariah goals of protecting the intellect, religion, life, honour and property,
- 2) Avert the prospect of an unjust government coming to power and preventing the Arab and Islamic peoples from entering the age of enlightenment, knowledge and progress, and
- 3) Work to promote economic prosperity and regeneration.

3 - The Declaration by al Azhar and the intellectual community on basic freedoms

The preamble to this Declaration, which was issued in 2012, notes that the liberation revolutions which have recently swept across part of the Arab world “raised the ceiling of freedoms and ignited a spirit of comprehensive regeneration across the different sectors [of society]”. Consequently, Egyptians and the Arab and Islamic *Ummah* are looking to their '*ulama*' and intellectuals to reinforce the relationship between the general principles of Islam's Shariah and the systems underpinning the basic freedoms contained in the relevant international charters and conventions, which form the basis of the Egyptian people's own culture, civilization and aspirations for a better and brighter future.

The Declaration identifies four basic freedoms: freedom of belief, freedom of scientific and academic research, freedom of opinion and



expression, and artistic freedom. It classes freedom of opinion and expression as “the mother of all freedoms”.

The Declaration also notes that the principles and rules governing the present phase of the nation’s history cannot become realities in the fullest meaning of the word unless enlightened religious discourse goes hand in hand with sound cultural discourse in order to achieve a set of common goals that are acceptable to the whole of society and safeguard the public interest during the period of democratic transition. Only then will the Nation be able to establish its constitutional institutions through peaceful and moderate action with the support of Allah the Most High.

Freedom of belief

The Declaration regards freedom of belief and full citizenship status for all based upon equal rights and obligations as the corner-stone of a modern society. This freedom is guaranteed categorically by constitutional principles and religious Scriptures. The Qur’an states: “**There shall be no compulsion in religion. The right course has become clear from the wrong**”. (*Al Baqarah*, 256) and “**...whoever wills, let him believe, and whoever wills, let him disbelieve**” (*Al Kahf*, 29). The inevitable conclusion from this is that religious coercion, persecution or discrimination in any shape or form is a crime and that every member of society has the right to embrace any principles they wish without loss of status or denial of their eligibility to live as free citizens.

As the birthplace of Divine Revelation and crucible of the Abrahamic faiths, the Arab region feels bound to respect the sanctity of religion and religious worship and uphold the rights of individuals to practice their faith in freedom and dignity. This means an acceptance of pluralism and the right to be different, along with a universal obligation to respect other people’s feelings and embrace the principle of equality on the basis of full citizenship, along with its attendant rights and obligations. This in turn means a rejection of exclusion, expulsion, accusations of Unbelief, religious inquisitions or condemnation of other creeds – a position supported by constitutional principles and the Shariah as endorsed by the Muslim scholarship tradition.

Freedom of scientific and academic research

As well as being an assertion of a right, when people enjoy the freedom to carry out scientific and academic research unimpeded, this demonstrates beyond any shadow of doubt that any negative suspicions about Islam or slurs on its reputation are completely groundless. The time has now come for Egyptians, Arabs and Muslims to compete in the global scientific and cultural arenas. If we accept that giving the leading role in the arts, sciences and knowledge in general to the intellect and reason is – as the scholars say - an Islamic obligation, then theoretical and applied scientific research is one of the tools that should be used for that purpose.

Moreover, in order to ensure that they are effective, the main requirement for research institutions and scientists is that they should be granted unfettered academic freedom to carry out experiments, speculate on and test their ideas and enjoy the creative imagination and expertise needed in order to arrive at new conclusions that will add to the sum of human knowledge. In doing so they should not be subjected to any restrictions apart from scientific ethics and practical considerations.

Freedom of opinion and expression

The Declaration regards freedom of opinion as “the mother of all freedoms”, since no freedom can exist unless it can be expressed through channels such as writing, speech, art and digital communication. At the same time, freedom of opinion embodies the social freedoms that extend beyond the boundaries of individual liberty and include activities such as the formation of political parties and civil society organisations, freedom of the press and audio, video and digital media, and freedom of access to the information a person needs in order to form an opinion.

This freedom must be guaranteed by the letter of the Constitution and enshrined in just laws which may be amended if required. As evidence of this the Declaration refers to Egypt’s Supreme Constitutional Court’s expansion of the concept of freedom of expression to include constructive criticism, even if it is strongly worded, and its stipulation that “freedom of expression on matters [of] public [interest] may not be restricted by



[boundaries that may] not be exceeded; on the contrary, latitude must be allowed in it". However, in the interests of social cohesion and national security it also notes that religious beliefs and acts of worship must be respected and treated as inviolate. Consequently, no-one may be permitted to stir up sectarian strife in the name of freedom of expression.

Those present at the meeting agreed that freedom of opinion and expression is the true manifestation of democracy and called for the coming generations to be brought up in a culture of freedom which recognizes the right to be different and respects other people's ideas. They called upon those working in the religious and media sectors to promote tolerance, broad-mindedness and dialogue and reject bigotry and fanaticism.

Freedom of literary and artistic creativity

The essential purpose of literature and the arts is to develop a greater awareness of reality, stimulate the imagination, refine the aesthetic senses, sharpen the consciousness of what it means to be human and broaden people's understanding of life and society. Sometimes this involves taking a critical view of society and looking to create a better and more decent world than the one we live in today. As well as being linguistically, culturally, intellectually and creatively enriching, literature and the arts should also be encouraged and supported because they share similar goals to those of the Divinely revealed religions. However, it should also be recognized that there are limits to creative freedom; these should be determined by whether or not a creative work is socially acceptable and compatible with local cultural traditions and new ways of thinking. In this respect, the experts and critics should be the final arbiters on matters such as possible offence to people's religious feelings or violations of established social norms and values.

4 – The Al Azhar document on women's rights

This is the most controversial of the three documents and until now it has not been published officially. Although it was announced that its publication was being delayed on the grounds that the Islamic Research

Academy needed more time to study it, initial indications were that it had been warmly welcomed by women activists and those engaged in the field of women's rights.

This document is significant in that it has been produced by al Azhar on its own initiative in order to support Egyptian women in their battle against those who use religion as a means of belittling their status, restricting their role in society and reversing their gains.

The document points out that it rejects the politicisation of social issues or the exploitation of women in conflicts between different political factions. In its preamble it states that there is a pressing need to tackle family problems such as low levels of modern educational and religious knowledge. Moreover, in addition to calling for sociological field studies, it stresses that legislation on women's social affairs should be conciliatory rather than confrontational and that women should play an active part in public life on equal terms with their male counterparts. The physical exploitation of women must be classed as a crime and emphasis must be laid upon the broad-minded, moderate, tolerant values that characterise Egyptian culture and Egyptian family attitudes. Cultural and religious bigotry, the document notes, have a negative effect on relationships within the family and pose an obstacle to sound social development.

It was on these grounds that during the debates Egyptian intellectuals and women activists attacked the prevailing religious position and accused it of trying to undermine women's rights. They observed that respect for women had only featured in Arab and Islamic thought during those brief periods when the voice of rationalism was in the ascendant and the ruler had allowed a degree of democracy; this in turn had led to a reason-based approach to the Scriptures and women had come to be seen as men's partners, rather than as being subservient to them. It was noted that there is a close relationship between despotism and religious extremism of the sort typically seen in the kind of religious bigotry that only lost its sting during those periods of enlightenment beginning from the reign of the Khedive Ismail when writings first began to appear on women's rights. Furthermore, despite what many people claim, Qasim Amin was not the



first person to speak of freedom for women; Egyptian and Levantine women had already written about the subject during the 19th century.

In later years, Egypt's women's liberation movement really took off in earnest in tandem with the rise of democratic ideas, and it was during this time that Huda Sha'rawi and many other women, including Safiya Zaghloul, removed their traditional veils and uncovered their faces. The movement continued up to the end of the 1940s, and following the Revolution of July 1952 it was endorsed by Gamal Abdel Nasser, who rejected a call from the Muslim Brotherhood for Egyptian women to wear the *hijab* (head covering).

In Egyptian universities the sight of a woman wearing the *hijab* was unknown until the 1970s. And anyone who sees video recordings of Umm Kulthoum's concerts during that period will notice that this was true of Egyptian society as a whole.

The most controversial points in the document are those dealing with conventions and traditions, since each region has its own customs and practices and there are significant differences between – say – Lower and Upper Egypt. Another controversial topic is the *hijab*, which is regarded as “falling between the compulsory and voluntary categories”. The document also states that divorce should be by mutual consent between two partners; this was rejected by the members of the Islamic Research Academy, who asserted that mutual consent can only apply in the case of a *khul'* divorce (a divorce in which the wife divorces her husband by repaying him the dower or an agreed sum of money).

The Academy members also dissented over the question of custody of a child. This led to a serious difference of opinion between al Azhar and the National Council for Women.

The al Azhar document exonerates Islam from any misconceptions arising from the actions of those who would seek to exploit it for their own purposes. This exploitation of religion in order to mislead the general public is the main problem faced by society today and can only be effectively countered if the country's intellectual elite become fully engaged in the life of the community and expose this evil practice for what it is.